Joker 205 Basket Hit

By Lt. Jim Hays

The XO and I briefed a bomb and strafe hop for a COMPTUEX flight at a range on the North Carolina coast. We would launch from the CVN, get a bit of front-side tanking, and proceed on our mission. We were loaded with two Mk-82 inerts, plus 200 rounds of 20mm.

Our carrier launch was a standard Case I departure, and we climbed to 20,000 feet and joined on the Omega tanker (a modified Boeing 707). After the XO tanked, it was my turn, and I was cleared to the precontact position.

It was a beautiful, clear day, with no turbulence at altitude. Although I was a little rusty, tanking off the Omega is a dream come true. The Omega is incredibly easy to tank from, with its soft basket and long centerline hose. I was cleared to contact and advanced the throttles to gain three to five knots of closure. As I approached the basket, I was aimed too high and right. I tried to be smooth and backed the throttles to mid-range, but I wasn't quick enough to avoid the basket slapping the right fuselage. The basket moved down and underneath my jet until it went out of sight. I still was moving aft and away as the basket completed a full, yet slow, circle around the nose of my aircraft. I saw nothing out of the ordinary, so I reengaged the hose, received my fuel, and disengaged without incident. We exited the tanker and pressed on to the range.

Once we arrived on the range, the weather conditions were less than optimal for high-angle bombing. We flexed to a level lay down to get rid of the ordnance on a half-sunken-ship target, then we transitioned to the strafe pattern. We worked a 15-degree gun pattern, with mild maneuvering and no more than 5 Gs. After we strafed the target, we rendezvoused off-target, below the cloud layer, and headed to the USS *George Washington* (CVN 73) for our OK 3-wires.

After shutdown, maintenance saw the lower IFF antenna missing. After a cursory inspection of the surrounding area, the plane captain was told to dive the ducts to investigate for damage. Much to the amazement of everyone, the complete missing portion of the lower antenna was found intact—wedged flat against the port engine's inlet-guide vanes. The antenna apparently had remained fixed in that position for over an hour in-flight, held in place by the airstream. I had no airborne indications of the problem.

Obviously, the "what ifs" are eye-opening. Had the six-inch antenna continued its travels and FODed the engine, I most likely would have had a catastrophic engine failure. A borescope inspection on the port engine found nothing negative. Aircraft 205 was placed back in FMC status.

Watch your closure, and don't sacrifice a basket hit, trying to be too smooth. Tell maintenance as soon as possible after a basket slap, even if you don't think there is any damage.

Lt. Hays flies with VFA-34.